



PRESS RELEASE

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 20, 2002**

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ALIEN SMUGGLER CONVICTED OF HOSTAGE TAKING

PHOENIX, ARIZONA -- The United States Attorney's Office for the District of Arizona, announced today that Aquileo Melchor-Zaragoza, 31, of Phoenix, AZ, was found guilty of Hostage Taking, Conspiracy to Take Hostages; Harboring Illegal Aliens; Conspiracy to Harbor Illegal Aliens; and Brandishing a Handgun in Relation to a Crime of Violence, by a federal jury at Phoenix, Arizona.

The evidence at trial showed that Melchor-Zaragoza was a member of a gang of people who stole aliens at gunpoint from alien smugglers. The gang, which was made up of six men and one woman, began stealing aliens in September, 1999. After the undocumented aliens were stolen, they would be transported to safehouse where they were kept until their families paid for their release. If the family member did not agree to pay for the hostage's release, the gang would threaten both the aliens as well as their families. During the entire ordeal, the gang would possess, carry, and brandish firearms. This investigation began in March 2000, when one of the hostage's families notified the authorities. Subsequently, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) located the hostages at an apartment on 43rd Avenue in Phoenix, AZ. At that time three of the hostage takers and two persons harboring the aliens were apprehended. INS later located the remaining four hostage takers. Of the seven hostage takers and two harborers, six have plead guilty, one was convicted at trial, and two are set for trial in May, 2002.

Melchor-Zaragoza previously pled guilty to Re-Entry after deportation in February 2002 and is being held on that charge and well as on these charges.

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Aquileo Melchor-Zaragoza, had been charged with violating Title 18 of the United States Code, Sections 371, 924(c) and 1203 as well as Title 8 of the United States Code, Sections 1324(a)(1)(A)(iii) and (a)(1)(A)(v)(I). The case was tried before United States District Court Judge James A. Teilborg beginning on March 12, 2002 through March 20, 2002.

A conviction for hostage taking carries a maximum penalty of life, a \$250,000 fine or both. A conviction for brandishing a handgun during and in relation to a crime of violence carries a mandatory minimum penalty of seven years to be served consecutive to any of the defendant's other convictions.

The investigation leading to the guilty verdict was conducted by INS and FBI.

Sentencing is set before Judge Teilborg on June 19, 2002.

The prosecution is being handled by Lisa Jennis Settel, Assistant United States Attorney, District of Arizona, Phoenix, Arizona.

CASE NUMBER: CR-01-017-PHX-JAT
RELEASE NUMBER: 2002-066

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